

## NON-HUNTER FOCUS GROUP MEETING SUMMARY DECEMBER 18, 2007; CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA

### GROUP PROFILE

The nonhunter focus group took place on December 18, 2007 in Charlottesville, VA as part of a statewide effort to identify and evaluate issues surrounding hound hunting in the state. Approximately seventeen people were invited to attend this focus group meeting. Invitees were selected because they had previously contacted the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (VDGIF) and expressed an interest in participating, because they had some involvement in hound hunting issues in the past, or because they were leaders in their community. Four individuals attended this focus group meeting: two were males, two were females; all were white.

Individuals representing numerous and diverse outdoor recreation interests were invited to attend the non-hunter focus group but none of those individuals attended the meeting. Of those that did participate, three identified themselves as representatives of two different national animal rights organizations and one person identified himself as being neutral on hunting (but has participated in hunting) and interested in the hound hunting issue because the wildlife rehabilitation facility where he works occasionally deals with injured dogs and wildlife. One of the animal rights representatives indicated that although the organization for which she works opposes hunting, their reason for wanting to participate in the process was because they receive many calls from concerned citizens about the condition of hounds that they find.

### FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

The focus group was conducted for approximately two hours. During that time, participants responded to a series of questions posed by the facilitator (in bold, below). A summary of responses is provided below, including direct quotes from meeting participants that help to illustrate any common themes or key points from the discussion.

**In the areas where you engage in outdoor recreation, how have things changed over the past 10 years? If you have seen changes, were they related to changes in the types of activities people are engaged in, the number or quality of recreational experiences you have access to, or other factors?**

The focus group participants tended to recreate either in areas where hound hunting does not occur or is not allowed. For example,

*“Usually when I go hiking, it’s in a state park where hunting is not allowed, thankfully. I wouldn’t want to put myself in a situation where I would run across any hunting.”*

The participants also mentioned that during their travels through areas where hound hunting is allowed, they have frequently encountered lost, injured or dead hounds. For example,

*“You can always tell when you leave Albermarle County and enter Fluvanna County because you start seeing dead dogs along the edge of the road.”*

*“It is quite sad to go down [Route] 58. I don’t think I have ever driven two hours west of Norfolk on 58 and not seen a dead or a live hound of some kind...and not apparently hunting but just lost and looking sad.”*

One participant also indicated that his view of hunting has changed over the years due to the use of technology.

*“The use of telemetry, the use of radio tracking, the use of radios—it has completely changed what once may have been characterized as fair chase sport. I personally find it repugnant.”*

**What do you believe are the most important issues that need to be addressed in this review of the issues surrounding hunting with hounds?**

The focus group participants identified several issues, including the conflict between a landowner’s property rights and the right of hound owners to retrieve animals on private property regardless of whether or not they have permission from the landowner; they also identified the timing and length of chase seasons (especially for bear), the conditions at hunt club kennels and problems associated with hunting in fox pens as issues. They also noted that much of the public does not view hunting with hounds as fair chase. For example,

*“The idea that somebody can trespass on my property to retrieve their dog, at any hour of the day or night, when they may well have introduced that dog on my property on purpose, is an absolute outrage.”*

*“The length of time that people can pursue wildlife with hounds is an issue, particularly for bear.”*

*“[There should be] a mandated responsibility for the dogs. There are so many people who view them simply as a commodity to be used and there is no sense of responsibility for them except when they are being used.”*

*“Very frequently there is just sort of, you know, a collection of pens with a bunch of blue barrels, which are not adequate shelter for mostly these short-haired dogs, and they are in thin body condition, with no body fat, and they are really, really cold in the winter... When I was giving this some thought, I thought that perhaps, I don’t know how feasible it would be to have some regulations for hunt clubs or hunters who keep more than a certain number of dogs, would be subject to inspection or some kind of regulatory oversight by either the state, or empower the local animal control agency to require some basics. Because it does seem that hunt clubs get away with not providing some basic things that a local citizen, a private person, would be required to provide.”*

*“Fox penning is, to me, ethically indefensible, but it’s also a magnet for criminal activity, and it’s a magnet for disease spread.”*

*“Hound hunting is troublesome from the perspective of fair chase and the treatment of wildlife. I guess it takes away some of the fairness involved, or the hunter’s ethic of fair chase involved and kind of unequally unbalances the power, or the chance of killing that animal. I think that’s troublesome. I think from the perspective of a hunter, I would be concerned about it because I think the general public only supports hunting under certain situations—only if it is fair, only if the animals are consumed and that kind of thing. And any time that that idea is thrown out of balance, either someone is trophy hunting or someone is poaching, or someone is killing an animal and not consuming it, then the general public does not accept hunting. It is in the best interest of hunters to take care of their own ranks...when certain things are happening, like hound hunting...when it is a controversy, even within the hunting community, to me that is one of the biggest issues.”*

**What do you believe is the most appropriate way to deal with those issues (explore one issue at a time, choosing the 2 or 3 issues that surface most often)?**

Focus group participants discussed at some length, the issue of assuming personal responsibility for hounds and how to make sure that ownership can be definitely established. A sampling of the discussion includes the following quotes:

*“I think one of the things that it is too easy to do is deny responsibility for ownership, and we have the technology with microchipping now—you know if you pull the collar off a dog, it’s not your dog. He can be my dog as long as it’s hunting, but if I don’t want him anymore, off comes the collar. To require a hunting club to microchip their animals and that way, when that animal is engaged in something inappropriate, it’s found, it’s injured, it’s hurt, it’s a very, very simple process to identify the animal and track it back to the person who should be responsible for it. And that’s cheap...That removes the opportunity for the irresponsible owner to deny responsibility.”*

*“Also, from the hunter’s perspective, because I know there is concern about the dogs being taken, that proves that it is their dog.”*

*“Obviously, abandonment is against the law, but everyone knows it happens at the end of the hunting season, that some of these dogs are turned out and from that end, not just more enforcement but a stiffer penalty for abandonment might do the trick...I know in Southampton County, just because that is close to us, most of the dogs handled by the local pound are hunting dogs—I think 80% or something outrageous like that. That’s just because it is a rural county. It seems unfair for taxpayers to have to basically subsidize the capture and housing and either euthanasia or adoption of these dogs.”*

*“I think those of us who move in and around the sports understand that the predominant problem is with deer hounds. Somebody who has got an expensive registered Walker hound and they are coon hunting with it, they may have spent thousands of dollars for that dog and believe me, they*

*are not going to let that dog get away...But the deer hounds are not as specifically bred, in most cases, certainly not as well trained. They just chase stuff. And it's not that they are pursuing the scent of one species of animal, they are just chasing whatever will run."*

*"The challenge is to figure out a way to weed out the lowest common denominator, if that really is our target, without compromising or dramatically diminishing the opportunity of those who pursue any sport, any activity, legally. The challenge with any of this stuff is how do you create a strategy where enforcement is possible. That is one of the truly difficult things. I know a lot of people who care deeply about their dogs and the dogs run off and they are looking for them...How do you distinguish between that person whose dog is wandering around and nobody can catch it and the person who has just dumped the dog?"*

*"I don't know if the law provides...civil remedies for egregious violations. If somebody comes onto your property once to retrieve a dog, that's one thing, but if it's every day for a month, where these animals are constantly coming onto the property, where there is a pattern of abuse--I'll call it a pattern of trespass--there needs to be some provision in the law that that constitutes something for which the landowner, even if they can't file a trespass charge, that could be, without going to federal court. I don't think there is anything in state court right now that is there, but under federal law, in the Civil Rights Act, deprivation of use of property is a violation of your civil rights because you have a constitutional right to peaceful use of private property. And if somebody deprives you of the peace, you can proceed against them."*

The group also discussed options for regulating hunting with hounds. For example:

*"There are simple things that can be done. Before you want to hunt, you need to register those dogs with the state so they know if the dogs are out. If your dog is lost, you have to report your dog as lost within a certain period of time, so if the dog is found and you have not reported it, you can be held responsible."*

*"It seems as though if this issue is costing significant resources and time for the Department [of Game and Inland Fisheries], and that any further regulations would also require ongoing resources and time, that someone would need to buy a special hound hunting license to cover those additional costs."*

**What kinds of interactions have you had with hunters who use hounds? Have your experiences been mostly positive, mostly negative, or somewhere in between? If you have had negative experiences, please describe the problems you most often encounter, including any problems that are specific to hunting with hounds.**

Participants indicated that they had experienced both positive and negative interactions with hunters who use hounds, although the examples they gave focused on negative interactions or perceptions of the sport. For example:

*"The idea that I characterized earlier, about having been invited to participate in a bear hunt—I was ready to do what I thought hunting with a dog was, which was you go follow the dog. And I found out that, no, you weren't supposed to get out of the truck. You had people stationed in a*

*strategic grid, and everybody with CB radios. Even that was before telemetry on the dogs. There is just a real change, and people defend that now, talk about the traditions of hunting. Well, there is nothing traditional about a telemetry collar on a dog. There is nothing traditional about a mercury switch on a dog collar. There is nothing traditional about radios—to maintain, to see where the dogs are going to cross the road so you can bring fresh dogs and put it on the track. There's just nothing traditional about that at all. It's an all out assault. It's a technology assault. And to pursue those dogs on four-wheelers or three-wheelers or whatever. There is nothing traditional about that. The entire nature of what it once was has changed, and I find what it has become to be far less defensible and acceptable.”*

*“I have returned lost hunting hounds to their owners and I have to say I don't remember having any particularly positive interactions. There wasn't a great deal of gratitude or anything like that...even though the dog was not in the best of shape. Obviously, I am in a position to ask why the dog was not in the best of shape, because I am concerned about the dog's welfare...I couldn't tell you how many of those kind of situations I have been in, but several. Obviously that is of great concern, because if I find a dog that is in poor physical shape and I return the dog, it's possible the dog has been out for awhile and the person has been looking. I don't know...There is a concern when you bring a dog back to the person and the person isn't sharing your concern, if the animal has every vertebra showing and a great deal of hair loss and injuries and things like that.”*

**How were the problems you encountered resolved? Were you able to work out problems with hunters? Did you seek help from an outside party (law enforcement, local or state government)? Was the assistance you sought useful? If not, how could it be improved?**

The focus group participants did not report having extensive interactions with law enforcement officials, although some of them had frequently interacted with local animal control officers or local affiliates of the SPCA. In general, they were satisfied that law enforcement officials followed through after being contacted, although at least one participant had doubts about that.

*“I have called animal control on hunt clubs and on private residences where I thought animals were being kept in violation of law...I couldn't say whether law enforcement responded appropriately. I know that when I deal with law enforcement in rural Virginia at least, a lot of the times...the officers I deal with board their hunting dogs at the same hunt club that I am reporting, so it's just not likely that they are going to take enforcement action or frankly, even go visit. But I go through the motions and hope for the best.”*

*“I'd have to say that my experience has been different than that [in reference to previous quote]...I occasionally find bear dogs, rarely a coon hound. If I catch one, I will typically turn it over to animal control directly...almost always they will know the dog.”*

*“If we can catch that dog, we are going to report it and turn it in, regardless of who owns it, we will either take it to the SPCA as a free-roaming dog, where they have to pay to get it back, even if it is a hunting dog, just to make the point, because the area around us...is closed to hunting.”*

**Do you believe that the laws and regulations that govern hunting with hounds are adequate? What changes could be made to improve them?**

The focus group participants primarily discussed two main issues: private property rights versus the right-to-retrieve law and the welfare of hunting dogs. The welfare discussion centered on inspections of holding facilities for dogs. A sample of the discussion includes the following:

*“I think there are two things there. One is the trespass for animal recovery, which allows a human being to come on my property without my permission, and maybe even in direct contradiction of my prohibition. If I say, ‘You can’t come on my property,’ they darn well can. So, the fact that they are pursuing a discretionary sport, trumps my ability as a landowner to decide who can and who cannot enter my property without a warrant. I just find that an outrage, personally, and I am not a property rights zealot in any way, shape or form...The other thing is the trespass of the animal. I go to great lengths with my small acreage, to manage it for wildlife, and specifically for nongame wildlife. I am pretty aggressive with the neighbors’ cats. I don’t even let the cats come on there and if they keep coming, I’ll trap the cat and take it back—once. And then I’ll trap the cat and take it to the SPCA...The point being that I should be able to manage my property for the goals that I wish without having somebody else’s sport trump my decisions about how my property is used.”*

*“I really am not aware of any regulations that address the fact that the hounds’ welfare, period, unless there is local law...I think it is fair enough that the state has a pound and shelter inspector who travels across the state and inspects pounds and shelters and regulates other facilities. And it seems reasonable to expect that if this is such, it’s obviously an issue of concern or we wouldn’t be here, that the state have some way—and it should be funded by the folks who hunt with hounds—to inspect these facilities if there is more than a certain number of animals boarded there.”*

The group also discussed vaccinations and veterinary care for hunting hounds, especially as it relates to the dogs wandering onto other peoples’ property. Although participants realized that hunt clubs and kennels may legally vaccinate their animals (and that those animals may not, for example, have rabies tags on their collars), they expressed some concern that they would not know whether animals found on their property were properly vaccinated. For example:

*“It just seems that an ordinary citizen who doesn’t hunt with hounds or who wants to keep their animals safe should be able to tell if the dog that is running at their property is vaccinated or not.”*

**Are there any other questions this group needs to discuss?**

The focus group participants noted that hunters across the country are facing issues with decreasing access to lands and that hunting with hounds requires large acreages. One participant suggested that Virginia should look into establishing a minimum contiguous acreage requirement for hunting with hounds. The issue of how far hounds should be dropped from roads or from neighboring properties also was discussed. The participants also had questions about the process



for public involvement throughout the remainder of the review of hunting with hounds in Virginia.

#### SUMMARY

Participants in this focus group were from the Washington, DC area, the Tidewater area and from the Shenandoah Valley. Three of the four participants represented animal rights organizations that oppose hunting. The focus group moderators explained that while their input into the process is welcome, that the goal of the process is provide diverse opportunities for hunting with hounds in Virginia in a manner that is fair, sportsmanlike and consistent with the rights of property owners and other citizens. Participants identified the conflict between a hound owner's right to retrieve his dog and a landowner's right to control access to his/her property as a key issue. They also discussed the need to uniquely identify hounds and their owners as a means to deal with hunters who intentionally introduce their hounds on lands where they are not wanted.